

Sawbones 466: Railway Madness

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Intro (Clint McElroy): Sawbones is a show about medical history and nothing the hosts say should be taken as medical advice or opinion. It's for fun. Can't you just have fun for an hour and not try to diagnose your mystery boil? We think you've earned it. Just sit back, relax, and enjoy a moment of distraction from that weird growth. You're worth it.

[theme music plays]

Justin: Hello, everybody, and welcome to *Sawbones*, a marital tour of misguided medicine. I'm your co-host, Justin McElroy.

Sydnee: And I'm Sydnee McElroy. [pause] That's it.

Justin: I thought you'd say something else.

Sydnee: Oh, why? You always say something...

Justin: I know, I know, I usually have something else to say, don't I?

Sydnee: Yeah. I mean, Justin, in our long relationship, I've found you always have something to say. [laughs]

Justin: Uh, well, I... You know what? It's tough, I've been on the road a lot lately. I've been, uh, we went to Cincinnati to visit the beautiful King's Island.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Justin: And then, uh, there was San Diego Comic Con. You and I took a trip up to Columbus. It's just been very— A lot— We're gearing up to go to the beach soon for vacation. There's just a lot of travel.

Sydnee: And I have been growing lots of delicata squash.

Justin: That's true.

Sydnee: That's what I've been doing.

Justin: You went with me to several of the things I mentioned.

Sydnee: I know. I know. I'm just saying I am growing a lot of squash—

Justin: You're a very busy, dynamic woman. I don't want to give the wrong impression.

Sydnee: I am busy. I am busy. Um, you know, uh, travel is a great lead in to our topic today.

Justin: Even when I do one that's so organic, you can't help yourself.

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: You have to... You can't...

Sydnee: I didn't know if it was intentional!

Justin: Of course it was. I've been doing this since 2008. Of course it was, I've been doing this for 15 years. Of course it was.

Sydnee: Was it really or do you...

Justin: It was, like, yeah! Yeah, Syd.

Sydnee: That wasn't an acc—since, I just thought it was an accident. Anyway, um...

Justin: I was so proud of myself.

Sydnee: This episode is brought to you by Chris, Chris from Long Island. Thank you, Chris.

Justin: He's our sponsor for this week. When you need, uh, authentic artisanal soaps and other handcrafted goods, come to Chris from Long Island.

Sydnee: I have no evidence that Chris...

Justin: Use our coupon code.

Sydnee: ...that Chris from Long Island can make you artisanal soaps. He... I don't know! They might. Chris might do that. But I don't know.

Justin: Sawyer's, like, twelve and he can make artisanal soap.

Sydnee: That's true, that's true. Sawyer...

Justin: ... Sawyer can make artisanal soaps, why can't Chris from Long Island?

Sydnee: We love your soap, Sawyer, thank you.

Justin: Thanks, Sawyer.

Sydnee: I don't know, Chris may do that. Chris did not detail that, just introduced me to this, uh, illness. This historical malady...

Justin: Well, that sounds even worse! [laughs]

Sydnee: Well, not— Didn't introduce it into my body, like, into my system. But, like, told me about it in an email that I appreciated and then, uh, inspired this episode. So, um, we're gonna talk about something called Railway Madness.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: Have you ever heard that term?

Justin: Never.

Sydnee: Okay. I hadn't either. Um, but before we talk about Railway Madness, the reason that it has kind of come to popular attention right at this moment is because of a sort of related issue that, um, was first brought up that Chris talked about and then some people, some YouTubers have been talking about, and I thought might be just, like...

You know how sometimes we talk about shark attacks a lot? But it's not because there were more shark attacks, it's just because everybody started talking about shark attacks? You know that phenomenon?

Justin: Yeah. Yeah.

Sydnee: I kind of thought that's what this was, but it turns out it might not be. So, the question that gave rise to this episode is why are so many people, um, having some sort of episode, whatever it is, on airplanes these days?

Justin: Mm. Are you asking—was that rhetorical or are you asking me?

Sydnee: Do you know?

Justin: Do I know?

Sydnee: Did you know that was happening? Did you know that there were more...

Justin: I mean, I know that we see a lot of video evidence of it. It does seem to be, um, I'll say related, I don't know. There's been an uptick of that kind of thing at Disney World. There's been...

Sydnee: Really?

Justin: Yeah. There's been, uh, an uptick in, like, violence, people fighting there, fighting cast members. Remember that one cat that got super drunk in the Mexico pavilion and then started running through the kind of ziggurat they got there and people had to chase him down and he threw a barrier at some people? Like, there's been a lot of the kind of thing happening.

Sydnee: Now, listen... And, you know, when I hear that, I think, like, well, Epcot with your drinking around the world, you've been set up for that for a long time.

Justin: But that's always been Epcot.

Sydnee: That's true.

Justin: Why would it get worse?

Sydnee: That's true. I do feel like it's more of a thing now. People make t-shirts about it and stuff.

Justin: Well, certainly during the food and wine festival. I mean, that just kicked off yesterday, so...

Sydnee: They have so many drinking festivals, though! Like, they have lots of...

Justin: That's true, they're all kind of drinking festivals.

Sydnee: Anyway...

Justin: Even flower and garden, they'd be, like, "Oh, this is a hibiscus margarita."

Sydnee: Exactly. Exactly. They're all drinking festivals. Um, so I... My first thought was, "Are people really—" And when I say... I'm using the term episodes because it's, like, we're capturing a wide variety of things that are happening that cause people to behave in ways on airplanes that are probably not conducive to air travel.

Justin: [snorts] Right.

Sydnee: For them or anyone else on board. I didn't think it was true, I thought, well, it's probably just that one, we're noticing it and two, um, phones. Like, we film them and then we put them on YouTube and TikTok and all the other social media apps and so we're just seeing them.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: Right? We're just aware of them.

Justin: Of course. That's some kind of bias.

Sydnee: But then I found this article...

Justin: Confirmation bias, maybe.

Sydnee: ...that was published in the LA Times a month ago where there was an analysis done by the International Air Transport Association and basically they said, "Unruly passenger incidents—" So I guess that's the term.

Justin: It's, uh, yeah. It's a little bit more of a mouthful.

Sydnee: "Unruly passenger incidents on airplanes increased 47% from 2021 to 2022." So they have gone up.

Justin: From 2021 to 2022?

Sydnee: Yes.

Justin: Oh, okay. Interesting.

Sydnee: And they weren't— Okay. This is not... So there was an uptick in mask-related incidents, yes.

Justin: Yes.

Sydnee: We are talking about even after they stopped the mask mandate.

Justin: Here's what I think it is. It's the— 2021, the people were like, "Wow. I don't care about the masks, it's just so great to be on a plane. I love this. Just to be around this many other people, what a joy." Then 2022, they're like, "Ugh! Other people, I forgot! Ugh!"

Sydnee: "I hate this!"

Justin: "I hate this!"

Sydnee: And certainly, like, all of that plays into the statistics. Like, how many people. But, I mean, we're talking percentages. So, like, the number of people... Although the more people, uh... You know. Well, were more people flying in 2022 than 2021? Almost certainly, right?

Justin: Did— Were there definite, um, I think you could probably— There's definitely some economic factors here with, like, budgetary shortfalls, labor shortages all over, um... I know that's a problem for a lot of these places.

Sydnee: So a lot things play into this. Like, why would that happen? I mean, I'm not gonna tell you the one answer because there's so many confounders to that. I couldn't do that. But there've been some really famous incidents, I think, on social media.

The one that a lot of people noticed, I think... It was surfaced to me on my TikTok, I know. About the passenger who thought there was someone in their seat next to them who was there who wasn't there, like, an imaginary person.

There was an incident where somebody thought they were stuck in a time loop. And was becoming very upset and distressed, as you would be...

Justin: As one would, as one would.

Sydnee: ...if you were stuck in a time loop. Um, there was another one where a person charged the door and tried to open the plane during the flight.

Justin: Yikes.

Sydnee: Because of some... Again, in, like, all these incidents what is happening exactly, we don't know. I mean, it's not, like, afterwards... The airline— There was no responsibility of the airline to give you a follow-up

later, to be, like, "Just so everybody knows, here's what was going on." We don't know, right?

We know that something happened, someone became very distressed and upset, and it was dangerous for everyone on board, including the person who's upset. Um, and usually, if you look at, like, statistically, why do these things happen on planes...

Alcohol is a huge factor. I'm not saying in any of these cases, I don't know. I have no idea. But a lot of the times, people get really drunk on planes. They get drunk in airports, they get drunk on planes, and then they behave in the ways drunk people behave.

Um, there are people who... It's just the annoyance of being on an airplane sometimes. The person next to you is bothering you in some way that probably is pretty minor and were you both on land, you would just walk away from each other, but since you're crammed in this metal tube next to each other and you can't move and...

Then everything they're doing is really wearing on you and so then a minor incident becomes something really intense. Um... Or it might just be, like, a lot of people are afraid of flying. So you have all that fear and that anxiety...

Justin: Mm-hmm. Get you all pumped up, fight or flight, decide to fight because you can't fly because you're already flying.

Sydnee: And that can manifest as a lot of paranoia. If you're somebody who starts thinking, like, I'm feeling this way, does it mean something? Which a lot of people do. "I have a sinking feeling, does it mean something bad is gonna happen on this flight?" No—

Justin: I mean, if you have a literal sinking feeling...

Sydnee: [laughs] Well...

Justin: ... that means something has—

Sydnee: Um, why would it be more? Well, we know that people are drinking more. That's a fact.

Justin: Yeah. Yeah.

Sydnee: Um, we've seen that. And probably this is related in part to the pandemic, but there are lots of factors. Lots of things win that too. We're— By the way, we're drinking more liquor, specifically.

Justin: Huh.

Sydnee: These are US stats. People in the US are drinking more liquor. We are drinking as much liquor as we did during the Civil War days.

Justin: Weird. That's a lot.

Sydnee: Yes. Like, we've shifted away from beer and we're drinking more liquor. So there's that. Um, I think the pandemic has contributed to this in myriad ways. I think there's been...

There was so much fear and anxiety around travel, around being on planes, around being around other people. It makes sense that that would play into people's already, sort of underlying fears, anxieties, or chronic mental illnesses. Um, we have seen cases of psychosis in general are increasing.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: We don't know why. Uh, there is the thought, is it related to COVID? About 77% of the US population has had COVID as of the end of 2022. They have found evidence that that's how many of us... And now it'll be higher than that, right?

So, like, eventually, 100% of the US has had COVID. If the concern has been can COVID cause long-lasting mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, or even psychosis, can they? Can it? Uh, we don't know. There've been some correlations, nobody is sure. It's been suggested. We don't know. There are more incidents happening on planes, it seems. There's

a lot of factors and the question is what is it about, specifically, travel that seems to trigger this.

Justin: Now, does this tie into the railroad—railroad?

Sydnee: It does. The railroad? [laughs]

Justin: The wailroad? The railroad.

Sydnee: [laughing] You just want to talk about trains, don't you?

Justin: Yeah, they're cool.

Sydnee: That's what you sound like, a little kid, who just—

Justin: Yeah. Excited about trains.

Sydnee: I know, you're excited about the trains, you want to talk about the trains. So, I think what's interesting is there is precedent for it in that we saw this kind of problem early in the railroad days. It's weird because planes aren't new. It's not like we just all started flying on planes in the last couple years.

Um, so, I mean... It does—it's not a perfect example, but certainly there was, for a while, the thought that traveling on a train triggered some sort of... Uh, psychosis wouldn't have been the word we used then, but nervous condition probably would have been the phrase people used.

It was a big turning point, we're talking about, like, mainly the mid to late 1800s is when, like, railway transportation for, like, people just going places, you know? I mean, obviously, the railroad existed before that, uh, but this is when, really, the birth of, like, "Hey, you could get on a train and go somewhere for travel. Wouldn't that be cool? You could get there faster."

Justin: That'd be super cool.

Sydnee: Yeah. It gives you a lot more freedom, um, it gives everyone a lot more—everybody who can buy a ticket, who is allowed to get on the train

and come buy a ticket gets more freedom this way. And they can get places faster, but that's also intimidating. All of a sudden, you have more options and...

Justin: That FOMO gets wild.

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: The FOMO's, like, "I could be in Colorado with my nephew," or whatever it is. I don't know the old timey people...

Sydnee: You have a nephew in Colorado?

Justin: It's, like, an old-timey person. That is...

Sydnee: I don't think you have a nephew in Colorado. I know your nephews. They're not in Colorado.

Justin: Right, I just meant, like, and old-timey person could be like, "I could be taking a train right now to Colorado!"

Sydnee: Does Griffin know they're in Colorado? [laughs]

Justin: "I can see that big canyon everybody's been talking about. I hear it's mighty grand." That was before it was called the Grand Canyon. But, like...

Sydnee: Right. But that was how it got called the Grand Canyon. Somebody said that and they were like, [gasps]. "That's what we should call it!"

Justin: "Tell everybody on trains, they can spread the word!"

Sydnee: "Really fast!"

Justin: [laughs]

Sydnee: So, um, part of this, I will say... And this kind of plays into the whole issue that would happen, is that a woman could get on a train and go somewhere very quickly... without anybody controlling her.

Justin: And that's where it all went wrong.

Sydnee: That was intimidating, specifically, and concerning to the menfolk.

Justin: Yes.

Sydnee: Who didn't like the idea of these delicate flowers...

Justin: Just disappearing.

Sydnee: ... being...

Justin: Being in one place and then a few hours later being somewhere else? What are we supposed to do with that?

Sydnee: They would be swiftly transported anywhere and if they had the means to purchase the ticket, they could maybe go without your permission.

Justin: Ooh.

Sydnee: [laughs] So there was a lot tied up... And the reason I put this concept in your head is that the people who seemed to suffer from this railway madness that we're gonna talk about were primarily men. They seemed to be the ones who were stricken with whatever was happening to them.

And, you know, it is not... I don't think it's wild to suggest that part of it was them being confronted with this new, like, revolution in industry and technology and travel and, like, the implications of that for their, sort of, stranglehold on all of society.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: If that's fair to say.

Justin: Yeah, I think that's fair to say.

Sydnee: Yeah. Um, so throughout the late 1800s, and, like, really the 1860s was where we start to see a lot of these reports. The 60s and the 70s are where you see, like, tons of reports in newspapers of railway madness. It will really fade out for the most part in, like, the 1890s. There are a couple scattered cases after that, but for the most part, this is when we see, like, men getting kind of wild on trains for reasons that...

Justin: I used to... [laughs] I used to love those DVDs.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Justin: Uh, when I was in college, they'd advertise them on TV, it's like...

Sydnee: Men go wild on trains.

Justin: "Men going wild on trains! \$19.99!"

Sydnee: So, uh, let me give you a flavor of what this looked like, because you're, like, "What are these guys doing?" I know that's what you're wondering. Like, what is railway madness, what is happening? It's not one thing. It's basically people behaving, sort of like I talked about on planes, in ways that are not conducive to railway travel.

Justin: To... Right.

Sydnee: While on trains. Um, there was a guy on a train to Liverpool who started... Who pulled out a pistol and then started attacking all the windows with his pistol and, like, hitting them and just running up and down the train, yelling at people and kind of freaking out and attacking... He didn't actually shoot anybody, but, obviously, he had a gun so it was scary.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: And then when the train stopped, not... He was riding all the way to Liverpool, so it wasn't his stop. But when it did stop for other people to

get off, he, like, chilled out. He sat down, he was calm, and then when the train started going again, right back up, attacking the windows.

Justin: Wild.

Sydnee: Right. Uh, there was a case of a really... Of a Scottish guy who was, like, a rich aristocrat, like, you know, well-to-do, probably the kind of guy who would sit there very posh, you know, staring down other customers, is kind of, like, the vibe I get. He took off all his clothes and was, like, leaning naked out of the windows, yelling, as the train was going.

Justin: But why?

Sydnee: Uh, we don't know. But once he got off the train? Totally fine.

Justin: Whoa.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm. Regained his composure and seemed to be fine. You can find, by the way, if you look this up, you'll find illustrations from old-timey newspapers.

Justin: Oh, nice!

Sydnee: And I love these because they're, like... Some of them are, like, cartoon panels, like comic strip style, like... Here's the guy emerging from his train car, looking kind of, like, wild-eyed. And here he is in the hallway with his fists raised like he's yelling something. And then here he is trying to, like, attack a woman in a train car and, like, the woman is...

And it's all Victorian, so, like, she's, like, fainting and he's looking very wild. And then there's one of, like, um... people, like, restraining a passenger and then somebody, like, punching a guy— Like, one guy punching another guy and everybody looks very dignified except for, like, the one guy whose, like, eyes are really wide. Like, this is the wild man.

Justin: [laughs]

Sydnee: Everyone else is very dignified. But I would highly recommend if you want to know more about these railway madness incidents, you would check out these illustrations, just because I just think that's really... Why don't we do that anymore?

Justin: Do illustrations?

Sydnee: We do, we just take pictures of things, we don't we do illustrations of events?

Justin: Oh, you know, you see illustrations from time to time. You know, Time will have one on the cover, New Yorker cartoons, I think, are still a big thing.

Sydnee: That's true.

Justin: Well, the editorial cartoons now... The [??] to these hilarious goof factories of editorial cartoons.

Sydnee: [laughs] Um... There were— And there were, like, more intense, like... Some of these were kind of, like, these, uh... These stories I'm telling you where it was mainly, like, somebody sort of running around screaming or somebody, like, waving out the windows and they were acting really threatening and intimidating, but they didn't necessarily do anything.

But there were, like, actual, like, injuries. Knife attacks and murders that took place sometimes. And, uh, and, like, there was this story that, and again, this was, like— These stories would be published and everybody would talk about them after they were in the newspaper.

There was, like, this huge sailor guy, like, this big burly guy who, like, you know, whatever happened, he started becoming very threatening and running around and out of his head on a train and so four guys had to hold him down and tie him to his seat for the rest of the journey so he wouldn't attack anybody.

Justin: Ugh.

Sydnee: And, uh, so what was happening?

Justin: I don't know, Sydnee!

Sydnee: Right? So, like, all of this is going on...

Justin: But why? You just gave me a lot of questions, but no answers.

Sydnee: Well, I'm gonna tell you.

Justin: Oh, thank goodness.

Sydnee: But first we got to go to the billing department.

Justin: God— That one I saw coming, so.

Sydnee: Yeah. You should have.

[theme music plays]

[ad break]

Justin: Okay, Dr. McElroy. You've kept me in suspense long enough.

Sydnee: Now, I think part of what you've got to know, too is, like, the milieu around these attacks is that people were becoming really afraid of, like, trains and what they could do to people and why people were doing it and part of that was because of, like... At that point in history, the design of the train itself and, like, if you were in a bad situation, your ability to access help. I mean, first of all, you're on a train. There's a reason why, like, a mystery on a train is a thing.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: You're stuck there. You can't go anywhere.

Justin: Yes. Self-contained.

Sydnee: It's scary. Yes, that's a scary place for bad things to happen. Um, in addition, if you were in, like, a private carriage, those lock from the inside.

Justin: Oh.

Sydnee: Right?

Justin: Yes, the perfect place for a murder.

Sydnee: Uh, not only that, like, all the carriages, and some of them lock from the inside, and you might have to share it with someone else, so then you're really stuck, right? If somebody starts to become, you know, I don't know. Whatever. They start to have some sort of episode and you're locked in there with them, nobody can get to you from the outside.

Even if they could, the chances that anybody else on the train would know it was happening are pretty slim because there wasn't, like, an easy way of communication. It's not like they had people going around peeking in every window constantly to make sure everybody was not taking their clothes off or whatever.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: In fact, they specifically don't want windows so that you can take your clothes off or whatever you want to do in that room.

Justin: For— But in a normal way.

Sydnee: In a normal way!

Justin: In a normal, appropriate way.

Sydnee: So, like, there were train lines that tried to address this by, like, putting little teeny windows in every car, which was just, like...

Justin: What— I mean— What have you done?

Sydnee: It's like the peeping tom window.

Justin: I mean, yeah.

Sydnee: It's like the pervert window.

Justin: Yeah, looking at a special pervert window, just for perverts.

Sydnee: I know! Like, nobody wants that in their private car!

Justin: That doesn't help.

Sydnee: Especially if, like, you're sleeping there overnight, like... No, I don't want a little window where somebody can stare at me while I'm sleeping! I appreciate the effort— And then they tried to, like, figure out, like, "Well, how can we wire communications through the train?" But there was just no easy way at that point in technological history to do that.

So you were secluded, you were kind of trapped, nobody could know, like, you could scream for help and people might not hear you right away. So that— I mean, that added to, like, it was really scary.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: For a lot of people.

Justin: Sure.

Sydnee: And because of that, it attracted the attention of doctors and scientists, medical professionals who were, like, "We gotta... We gotta figure this out. Why are men going wild on trains?"

Justin: [giggling]

Sydnee: Especially men who— I mean, the thought was that these aren't necessarily people with some sort of psychiatric diagnosis. There's something— Like, these are people who were... Who had no issues, got on a

train, behaved very atypically for them, and then got off the train and were fine.

Justin: I wonder if part of it was claustrophobia. I know that...

Sydnee: Could be.

Justin: ...you're not technically... With claustrophobia, it's not just, um, about the, like, the physical confinement. It's the idea of confinement, right? It's the idea that, like, you can't do something if you need to. And I can see that getting... You know, if you're someone who tends to perseverate on things in any way, it'd start to get a little maddening.

Sydnee: I can see— I mean, I can definitely see people having, like, a variety of, like, different panic attacks and anxiety attacks in those situations. I mean, I certainly have had moments... because I'm not afraid of flying, but I do get nervous sometimes.

And I have had moments on airplanes where I'll just get this thought that I can't— It's an intrusive thought, that's what it's called. Like, that the plane's gonna crash. And I can't get it out of my head.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: And I have had those moments and it is hard, because it's your brain doing it to you, to convince yourself that it doesn't mean something.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: Like, that's just a random intrusive thought, it doesn't mean anything. And then in the back of your head, brain's going, like, "Or maybe it does?"

Justin: "But what if it does?"

Sydnee: Maybe we all have a little clairvoyance, Sydnee.

Justin: It's a great—

Sydnee: Maybe we all have a little touch of it. [laughs]

Justin: It's one of our great flaws that the thing that is supposed to talk us out of bad thoughts is the same thing making the bad thoughts. We just have the one mind.

Sydnee: Exactly, exactly. And so a lot of that— Now, I mean, I do think it's— And when you hear about people who are just sort of, like, screaming or threatening other passengers, a lot of that makes sense. People getting naked, it starts to break down. Or actually, like, stabbing someone.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Like, someone with claustrophobia doesn't... They're not gonna do that.

Justin: Unless you're train drunk.

Sydnee: No, I mean, they could be drunk.

Justin: Train drunk, that's a whole other level of drunk...

Sydnee: This is not addressed—

Justin: If you've ever seen someone train drunk or plane drunk, that's a different drunk.

Sydnee: We're in Victorian times, so I imagine there's a lot of, like, suppressed...

Justin: Flaskmanship?

Sydnee: Desire. [laughing] In a variety of ways. So I don't know if people were drinking. I don't know. They might have been. They could have been. But they started— So they started looking to, like, what... What could this— What could be happening?

Which, by the way, part of this too was the thought initially, like, "Are these people, who are already mentally ill in some way that we— That—" [laughs] This was the popular theory. They're escaping from some sort of institution and because we have trains now, they can get away really quickly.

Justin: Oh, right, like, "Hello! I'm a regular passenger! I'm ready to get on! No, no one's looking for me! Let's go!"

Sydnee: It's— It's, like— And there was this, there was very much this fear of, like, "But now people... With the advent of trains, people could escape from, you know, a psychiatric hospital and be anywhere, instantly!"

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: Kind of like an infectious disease. See? These things echo. Like, it's the same thing, right? "Now the virus can get on a plane and go anywhere!" So, the popular medical opinion at the time was the vibrations of the train.

Justin: Ugh, I love that kind of stuff.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Justin: Sure, why wouldn't it be?

Sydnee: Yeah. That's what... That was what— There were a lot of, um, doctors who published papers and did lectures basically theorizing that, you know, when you're on a train, it's shaky. It vibrates. There's vibrations, you can feel it moving.

And the thought was that these constant vibrations were also, like, shaking your nerves. And at the time, the concept of nerves, and depending on where you live, you may still hear this used frequently.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: "I have nerves. I have bad nerves. I have a bad case of the nerves."

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Which isn't really— Like, that's not a diagnosis. Now, when people say it, they usually mean something like anxiety. That's usually what they're referencing. Or they may be just sort of talking about, like, stress, not an actual, like, diagnosis, but more like, "My nerves are really bad today." And what they mean is, like, "I'm having a rough day. It's very stressful."

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: That kind of thing. At the time. Nerves that send signals through your bodies, electrical impulses, and all that stuff, messengers, and your sort of general, like, ability to deal with stress and stuff, it was all kind of the same, right? Your concept of that was all the same.

So, um, we still thought that nerves was a thing and that it made you weak and scared and anxious and also it was very much associated with being a woman.

Justin: Mm. Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: Nerves was a thing that pretty much women got. Men could get it, but it was really a problem of women. And it was very much related to, like, hysteria, which we've done a whole episode on which was basically, like, a woman behaving in a way that we don't want the woman to behave. She is hysterical. And that was tied to, like, movement of the uterus throughout the body and stuff like that over time.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: But, like, basically, the idea is that these vibrations, by shaking your nerves, can make you into... [laughs] A woman. Not literally.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: But your constitution becomes that.

Justin: Like that, like unto that of a woman.

Sydnee: Like that of a woman. So you will become weak and frail and easily startled and upset. And you will feel that. And the theory put forth by some male doctors at the time, is that we cannot get too upset at these men. We cannot blame them because they are not weak and frail. They don't want to—

It was very much like hysteria. Some people said, like, is this just what hysteria looks like in men? We don't want to label them with that, right?

Because the reason women become hysterical is because they're weak and their minds are weak and their constitutions are weak and so they can't deal with the modern world, so they become hysterical. Men certainly could never do that. This is, again— This is not me.

Justin: We're— Sydnee is referencing, uh, the past. She is not saying that, like, the current...

Sydnee: Right.

Justin: In the current time period.

Sydnee: Right. Uh, so, basically...

Justin: Hysteria doesn't exist. So, yeah.

Sydnee: [laughs] Yes, hysteria does not exist. That is not a thing. So it— So basically, what is happening is that these men are getting on trains...

Justin: [laughs]

Sydnee: And they're fine. And then the vibrations start and they start to feel these changes in their body. They start to feel themselves becoming weak and anxious and of, you know, like a woman, basically.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: Like, their concept of what a woman feels like inside.

Justin: I want to play with you in this space, but you understand how hard that is for me to, like, add to this, so I'm just kind of letting you handle this.

Sydnee: So, when faced with this loss of... [in a low voice] manliness and virility and the strong tough constitution that a man has, [normally] when faced with that, it is only natural that they would become mad.

Justin: Yes.

Sydnee: And that they would take all their clothes off and wave pistols at people.

Justin: To feel all their man power being drained from them by the vibrations.

Sydnee: It is only... It is expected of someone with a strong constitution that, when faced with the concept of losing that, they would appear to us as if they had become psychotic.

Justin: Mm. Got it. Well, that actually makes perfect sense.

Sydnee: While for women, this is just inherent to who and what they are.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: For men, this is a physical problem that caused this and it's the train's fault.

Justin: [laughs]

Sydnee: And it's not man fault, it's train fault! And now, women, it's still their fault. Women, it's all their fault because they're so weak of mind and constitution, but for men, it's really just, like, it's the train. Um, so... We— It was really just because they were afraid they were turning into women. We can't blame them for that. And this was the popular, like, medical explanation from people at the time...

Justin: [laughs]

Sydnee: ... is that these vibrations did something to your nerves and this is why you, kind of, lost it, but also why did it mainly happen to men? Because women are used to feeling this way, basically.

Justin: Or— Yeah.

Sydnee: Women always feel the way men feel on trains.

Justin: [wheezes and snorts with laughter]

Sydnee: We walk around and...

Justin: "Is this what it's like for you, every day?"

Sydnee: Yeah! We walk around in a constant state of feeling frail and weak and anxious and hysterical, you know? Like, at any moment, we could just...

Justin: Who knows?

Sydnee: Go wild. Take our clothes off.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: And then, you know, many years later there'd be a whole series about the girls going wild, but... Not yet.

Justin: Not on trains.

Sydnee: No, the girls didn't go— I mean, I don't know. I didn't watch those videos. They may have gone wild on trains.

Justin: I'll Google...

Sydnee: That's totally possible—don't Google that!

Justin: [laughs]

Sydnee: Don't Google that! Um, so anyway, you could imagine, too, how this would play into, like, if this is what the vibrations were doing to men on trains, what could they do to women?

Justin: Ugh.

Sydnee: I mean, they're already... So— They're already so frail.

Justin: [crosstalk] Liquefy them, like T2. Just melt down.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm. You just, you feel the right vibrations and you're just, you're gone. No, there was a lot of concern that extended train rides would be hard on women because they already have such poor constitutions and so, like, if you put these frail women on trains and they feel these vibrations for too long, then they may become hysterical and you'll have to institutionalize them.

Also, like, it's a good reason, I think, to tell your wife not to get on trains alone. It sure would be useful to keep her at home.

Justin: Yeah, if you had this...

Sydnee: If you told her that the vibrations would harm her because men can barely stand them, um... It was also a good reason why women were encouraged not to, like, ever work on trains. Not that that was a huge option for many of them at the time. But, like, to get them in the engine room would... I mean, that's where the vibrations would be the worst.

Justin: So this is why while I was in the shower this morning, you came into the bathroom and started yelling about how you weren't allowed to work on trains.

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: That sounds like a joke that I made up, but it's actually what Sydnee did and she said, "You men always keeping me from working on a train! I

can work on a train if I want to!" I was absolutely, like, in the zone, enjoying my book, like, on tape or whatever I was listening to.

Sydnee: I assumed it was a Disney video.

Justin: Sometimes it's a Disney video. Sometimes it's an audiobook.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Justin: I'm a well-read man.

Sydnee: Uh, so...

Justin: Who was driven insane by trains.

Sydnee: So anyway, it was a big, like, it was a big deal. Um, Nellie Bly, the famous investigative journalist, who I think most of us remember the story of when she went, like, undercover in one of the institutions for... A lot for people who had mental illness, but then a lot of people were put there for various reasons.

Justin: There is certainly a Sawbones about Nellie Bly, right?

Sydnee: No, I don't think we've ever done a Sawbones about Nellie Bly.

Justin: Ugh!

Sydnee: She also, like, famously made a train trip that was a— I didn't know that. But, like, that was a big part of it was, like, she rode on a train for a really long time and went on a train adventure...

Justin: Train adventure!

Sydnee: And that was, like, a big deal because...

Justin: Yeah, just say train adventure.

Sydnee: ...she was a woman and she went on a train adventure and that's part of why it was a big deal is, like, trains were dangerous.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Then she went on a big train adventure.

Justin: How many men did she have sort of, like, watching over her throughout this adventure?

Sydnee: You know, I don't know. I don't know a ton about her train adventure.

Justin: It may have been... You're saying it might have been solo. That's terrifying.

Sydnee: A solo woman on a train. What will they think of next? It's like a dog playing the piano.

Justin: [laughs]

Sydnee: Uh, so anyway, what they finally came to is, like, a little train riding could be okay, because maybe, even though the vibrations in a man can be dangerous, the vibrations in a woman, yeah, too many could be dangerous, but maybe a little would be actually good for them because maybe it would make them stronger and tougher, kind of like...

Justin: Ohh...

Sydnee: Kind of like men are? Maybe it would toughen them up. So I don't know. I don't know why train vibrations suddenly can alter your gender identity in this Victorian concept, but that was very much what people thought for just, like, a couple decades.

Justin: [laughs]

Sydnee: Like, these train vibrations... And then you'd hear these reports in the news and be like, "Ah, another guy. The vibrations, look what the

vibrations— Look at this poor man, look what the vibrations did to him! Stay off those trains, honey. Don't you get on those trains! Just a little bit, because you're more fun when you get on a train for a little bit, but you're on there too much and I'm gonna have to institutionalize you."

Um... And then it just went away! It's like a lot of these, when we've talked about sort of, like, these, um... mass, uh, psychogenic illnesses that we've talked about in the past, kind of like the dancing plague or, like, the laughing plague and things like that.

So, like, this was there and then, in, like, the 1890s, we just stopped talking about it. And people were just riding on trains and if somebody had some sort of episode or something on a train, there was another one in 1894, where there was a person who got naked and, like, tried to disable the communications on the train...

Justin: Whoa, that's intense.

Sydney: ...and then, like, was roaming all over, trying to attack people. Like, it was a very intense thing. And, of course, it was reported on. Like, of course the news is going to talk about it, but it was in no way tied to railway madness, it was no way put in the context of this thing that we talked about for a couple decades and were all really worked up about and that doctors wrote papers about.

It was like, "Well, I don't know. A guy did a weird thing on a train. Anyway, in other news..."

Justin: "I don't know. Go figure."

Sydney: And they moved on to other things! And, like, railway madness was pretty much forgotten and nobody worried about vibrations on trains anymore.

Justin: Go figure. So...

Sydney: There you go. I don't know.

Justin: Trains are— Hey, listen. Trains are, statistically speaking, still one of the safest way to travel. I hope no one is put off of trains through this, you know I love trains.

Sydnee: I know you love the romance of the rails.

Justin: The romance of the rails! Hey, thanks so much for listening to our podcast. It's called Sawbones, we've been doing it for over 10 years now. It's true. Uh, if you enjoyed this show, we ask that you share it with a friend. How about that? We never ask that.

Just say, like, "Hey, this is a good show." Put it on your Threads or your Blueskys or whatever you're doing these days. Uh, thanks to the Taxpayers for the use of our song Medicines as the intro and outro of our program. And thanks—

Sydnee: And thank you Chris from Long Island. I wouldn't have known anything about all of this if it weren't for you sending us that email.

Justin: Yeah. Thanks, Chris.

Sydnee: What's our email again, Justin?

Justin: Sawbones@MaximumFun.org.

Sydnee: Yes. If you have, uh, topic suggestions, please keep sending them my way because I love learning about this stuff, too.

Justin: Yeah. And that's gonna do it for us, until next time. My name's Justin McElroy.

Sydnee: I'm Sydnee McElroy.

Justin: And as always, don't drill a hole in your head.

[theme music plays]

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